

## Population: myth and reality

### The Cairo International Conference on Population and Development

The Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in September 1994, gave us a misconstrued equilibrium. Now that there has been a year for the heat and dust to settle down, it is pertinent to look at the real issues. The carefully cultivated controversy on rather subordinate issues helped the conference to avoid discussion of the central issues on population-resource use conflict: overconsumption. The controversy over abortion which dominated reporting of the conference was essentially a Western domestic problem moved to the UN stage to divert attention from this issue.

Over the past decade it has become glaringly obvious that the population-resource conflict cannot be resolved without addressing the problem of unsustainable patterns of consumption. But how long is it going to take global (read Western) policy-makers to acknowledge that it is economic privilege and technological power that is at the heart of the resource depletion and not simply population size. The total resource consumption of twenty average families in the developing world is less than the consumption of just one average British family (with two children). An average Northern citizen consumes seventeen times more copper, for example, than an average person in the South. In the case of aluminium the difference is a factor of twenty against the South. India uses less paper for printing all its school text books than the Scandinavian countries use for producing pornographic literature. The one-fifth of the human population that occupies the North consumes 80 per cent of the world's resources, and if we have to save the world from an irreversible resource crisis, the world should focus its attention on the North.

The industrial economies play a devastating role, not only in consumption but also in discharging polluting wastes. The per-capita emission of greenhouse gases by the US population, for example, is twelve times more than that of South Asia. Thus by depleting the resource base and impairing the environmental space, the Northern economies are provoking an irreversible crisis. The 57 million babies that will be born in the North in the 1990s will help accelerate this twin crisis into a catastrophe, while most of the 911 million babies born in the South in the same period will simply stay alive, if they survive at all.

The inequity works not only between countries but within countries as well. In India, for example, 1.5 per cent of the population, numbering about 12 million, hold about 65 per cent of the nation's private wealth, while 30 per cent of the population, amounting to the total population of all Western European countries, live below the poverty line set by the standard of a meagre Rs 195.50 (\$US 6.5) per capita per month.

The polarization of wealth and poverty in India is further compounded by the religiously sanctioned graded division of the society. The majority 'low' castes bear the nation's great poverty and deprivation.

Another central issue that was ignored by the Cairo Conference is the population density dimension. Scientifically speaking, most developing countries have extremely low levels of population in relation to the size of their countries or their respective carrying capacities. In contrast, most industrial countries are heavily overpopulated. Western Europe is four times more densely populated than Africa. The Netherlands, Belgium and Japan have the highest population densities in the world. (In the developing world only Bangladesh and the Indian states of Kerala and West Bengal could match them in density.) The UK's population density is double that of China and five times that of Kenya – an 'acute population problem country'.

Developing countries do have a higher population growth rate, but this is an absolutely normal feature of population dynamics. These countries are simply following the pattern of demographic trajectory that occurred in the West following the so-called Industrial Revolution. This population explosion in Europe had multiple devastating effects on the global community, the least pardonable of which was the virtual annihilation of the societies of the American continents, Australia and New Zealand and the irreversible occupation of their nations (pre-Columbus 'America' had a greater population than tiny Europe). The developing countries certainly do not have scope for repeating such crimes today and therefore their population densities will be stabilized within their own carrying capacities.

But the key to managing population growth is not so much sterilization as improving the socio-economic milieu. In this respect the southern Indian state of Kerala provides a model for the entire world. Although the state has a population density that exceeds chronically overpopulated Western Europe, it has achieved stability in population growth. This stability was reached by achieving fairly good standards in health care, child care, literacy, women's education and land redistribution through social engineering and government planning, despite the provincial economy being heavily dependent on other states of India and on remittances from the expatriate workforce in the Gulf countries. By contrast, the market miracle that capitalist fundamentalism insists on would now further frustrate the efforts of developing countries to improve their social milieu, and thus promises to distort further the demographic picture.

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